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ABSTRACT

Sherburne-Earlville Central School District, a rural conservative White community in upstate New York, in its search for a new superintendent, found an educational leader quite different from its traditional social profile--a Black woman from New York City. The school board had the vision to establish a process that focused on what was important. Once priorities were clearly understood, other issues were not discussed. The board knew what it wanted and was open to all eligible candidates, not just those presented by agencies. This booklet describes how the board led the community in welcoming the new superintendent with a social and professional transition that did not disturb positive feelings in and about the school system. The board planned for the new superintendent to be able to shape her staff before her contract actually began, and the outgoing superintendent invited her participation in district business. The board and the superintendent kept district business open, invited community participation, and responded to community concerns. Broad staff participation in the search process insured support for the new leader. The school board hired Dr. Mary Cannie because she was well qualified, sincere, and energetic. She chose the district because it was sound, supportive, and poised for new ideas. The Sherburne-Earlville Central School District is better now because a healthy school community was eager to grow, the Board of Education operated from a base of clear priorities without regard for irrelevant issues, and Dr. Cannie was willing to make an extraordinary contribution to her new environment. Includes the district's mission statements from 1989-91, and a vision statement from 1992. (TD)

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THE BEST FOR OUR CHILDREN:

THE SHERBURNE-EARLVILLE STORY

LaRuth Gray

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Photo by Barbara A. Dudds

Mary Cannie

Superintendent,
Sherburne-Earlville Central School District

THE BEST FOR OUR CHILDREN:

THE SHERBURNE-EARLVILLE STORY

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Foreword

In our continuing effort to focus attention on the complex issues of education and the diversity of our society, we have discovered that there are many accomplishments in education that reflect the good things about human interaction within the context of sound educational practice. We are pleased, therefore, to present a story of a successful practice by a school district in the hope that we can all draw on the lessons learned.

Although attention to the issues of diversity predates the 1990's, the last five years have been significant in broadening the scope of our concerns and forging fundamental changes in the impact on public schools. While some see diversity as a strategic management issue, it is rather a major challenge requiring flexibility of policy makers and an opportunity for school districts to benefit by creating a culture that enables members of diverse groups to perform to their potential. We hope that you read this story with the knowledge that we cannot value diversity in our society, or more importantly in our children unless we value diversity in those who serve the public schools.

LaMar P. Miller
Executive Director
Metro Center

Introduction

Small rural school districts often provide standards that all school boards and educators can learn from. The Sherburne-Earlville Central School District in upstate New York is a success story that needs to be told. Clear priorities, healthy attitudes, and good planning were the simple tools the Sherburne-Earlville Board of Education used to advance an already good school system. The process the Sherburne-Earlville school board used to search for a new superintendent made the system better for the children and, incidentally, achieved a unique success in educational politics. With no sensitive problems to solve, this conservative white school community found that what was best for its children was an educational leader who happened to be quite different from its traditional social profile. At a time when larger white districts still complained that they were not "ready" for a woman or a black superintendent, Sherburne-Earlville hired an African-American woman, trained in the educational powerhouses of New York City, to be the new superintendent in 1990.

The school board did not set out to break with tradition any more than it set out to fit into it. The board just tried to find the best educational leader they could afford. When Dr. Mary Cannie was hired as Superintendent of the Sherburne-Earlville Central School District, she joined a very tiny cadre of female educators finally wending their way into leadership positions. In 1993, 60 out of the 717 New York State K-12 school districts are headed by women. In the state's entire history there have been only five African-American K-12 superintendents who were women.

The educators of Sherburne-Earlville were satisfied that their schools were doing a fine job, yet they felt more could be done. In their search for a new leader, the board's foremost concern

was what was best for their population. From the start, there was a symbiotic relationship between Dr. Cannie and Sherburne-Earlville. During the search process and later, the relationship was a good chemistry based on mutual respect. Dr. Cannie's personal credo mirrored the ambitions of Sherburne-Earlville. She believed that she could always do a job better and she encouraged others to do more for themselves. Her primary concern was developing the best curriculum to serve the needs of the children. Cannie understood and accepted the special role she could play in the community -- as a role model for women and a catalyst for expanded perceptions on minority people. The school board recognized an opportunity to bring their students into the diverse world of the 21st century. Cannie grew too, as a person, as an administrator, and in her understanding of a farming community.

Sherburne-Earlville is a success story because the school board, the search committee, and Dr. Mary Cannie did not allow considerations of background, sex, or race to interfere with their search for excellence.

The Players

The Community

Sherburne and Earlville are villages nestled in the rolling farmland of Chenango County in central New York, some 50 miles south of Syracuse. All of Sherburne and part of Earlville make up the Sherburne-Earlville Central School District. The main street of Sherburne is distinguished by small homes, small businesses, two supermarkets, the Sherburne Motel, Lewis' Restaurant, and a vacant 119,000 square feet manufacturing plant that used to employ 650 workers.

The biggest thing around is the modern Sherburne-Earlville Middle School-High School building spread out on a bare hill just off Route 12. Most of the homogenous families of Sherburne have been here for many generations and continue to earn a living from land-related skills. The Sherburne-Earlville school system is the largest employer of professionals, followed by the GTE Corporation in Sherburne, Proctor & Gamble Pharmaceuticals (known as "the pharmacy") in nearby Norwich, Colgate University ten miles north in Hamilton, surrounding school districts, and the National Bank and Trust Company.

The District Population and Profile

Most of the 134 teachers and 11 administrators reside within the school district boundaries and have remained in their positions for many years. They enjoy working in the district and have strong feelings about the quality of education there. The two most recent former superintendents, for example, continue to be involved with the schools, one as a teacher and the other as a member of the board.

Three buildings house Sherburne Primary, Earlville Elementary,

and the Middle School-High School. With a budget of approximately $11.5 million, the district serves a pupil population of just over 1600. Twenty-five buses travel 356,000 miles per school year at a cost of $575,723. Sixty-nine percent of graduates pursue higher education in either four-year or two-year colleges. Thirty-three percent of the students qualify for subsidized meals and just over ten percent are eligible for special education services. As with many other school districts in the 1900's, Sherburne-Earlville has some problems related to teen pregnancy and at-risk populations. The drop-out rate in the 1990-91 school year was three and a half percent.

The School Board

Advised by Superintendent Joseph Martinelli that he would retire in 1990, the school board had a year and a half to plan its search for a new superintendent. Leadership for the search process was provided by Lou Lieto, the board president. Lieto was a first-generation college graduate with a Ph.D. in Chemistry. He had lived in the area for almost twenty years, had a child in the Sherburne-Earlville schools and, through his work with Proctor & Gamble, had developed expertise in recruitment and hiring. He helped the board ask the questions that would lead to the educator who could provide the best program for their children. Peter Darby, the current board president, was also a part of the process. He had two children in the school system. Darby, who has a master's in English, had taught on the college level, had been a farmer, and finally chose specialized carpentry as a profession. Darby had a lot in common with Lieto, although they did not know each other before their board affiliation. Both knew how to deal with people.

Others on the board were Raymond Howes, a retired high school teacher; Kathryn Sabino, a middle school social studies teacher; Marge Campbell, a working parent and graduate student; Grant Cross, proprietor of a small electronics business; Jack King, manager of the milk co-op; David Eastman, a Ph.D. toxicologist with Proctor & Gamble; and Tom Breon, another

Proctor & Gamble employee with a Ph.D. in Industrial Pharmacy. This particular board considered themselves ordinary people in Sherburne but they had the management expertise to know the importance of including many others in their decision making.

In 1989, the school system ran smoothly, and had acceptable test scores and student achievement. Yet the school board saw the search process as an opportunity to assess the district and make whatever changes were necessary. They were committed to finding the best possible educator for their kids, the challenge of change, and an open search process.

The Superintendent

Dr. Mary R. Cannie assumed the superintendency of Sherburne-Earlville on July 1, 1990. She came to Sherburne from a small school district in Wyandanch, Long Island, some 250 miles away. As Assistant Superintendent for three years, she supervised four principals, four program directors, and three consultants. The support from the Wyandanch community and the broad opportunities for innovation she was given there were "my best preparations for leadership," says Cannie.

Cannie's academic preparation for a superintendency was a focused effort over twenty-two years to be the best educator she could be. The first in her family on both sides to go to college, she was influenced by her hard-working and supportive mother and her father. Her father's disability forced him to be homebound and an untraditional role model. Their talks after school taught her to ignore the "Who does she think she is?" taunts from other students and push on to be the best. Born in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood and raised in South Jamaica in the borough of Queens, Cannie was unable to afford a college campus experience. She commuted to the City College of New York and earned a bachelor of science degree in elementary education in 1971. While teaching in the New York City schools, she earned a master of science degree in guidance

counseling in 1973. In 1977 she earned a master of science in supervision and administration from the Bank Street College of Education and later, a doctor of education degree from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro majoring in educational administration in 1985.

How They Came Together

The Staff Decision

Stating that the quality of education for all students was the first priority, the board asked the staff to review the administrative structure and suggest what they should look for in a new superintendent. After many group discussions, agreement was reached that the new superintendent should be an educational leader with strong curriculum development expertise, assisted by a business manager who would oversee budget and facilities issues. The board next worked in the details of the search process: the composition of the search committee, the timetable, who should do what, what questions should be asked, what answers would be reasonable. The board also decided to bypass the typical pre-screening processes of using educational "head hunters" and/or the BOCES District Superintendent to help screen or select candidates. They chose instead to advertise directly in the New York State Jobs Network newspaper for public school personnel as well as other publications.

The Selection Process

In the meantime, Mary Cannie was looking for a small district where she could maintain the direct contact she enjoyed with students and staff. She saw the Sherburne-Earlville advertisement in the summer of 1989. She applied because the student population, achievement records, and other accomplishments portrayed a good atmosphere in which to work. Would a "head hunter" have contacted her? She does not believe so.

The first meeting of the Superintendent Search Committee was held on September 21, 1989. The committee was composed of board members Lieto, Darby, and Breon, Superintendent Martinelli, two principals, three teachers, three community

members, and a union representative. Of the 125 applicants, 50 were identified as prospects. Their applications were reviewed in detail. The pool was narrowed to 25 candidates. A second review resulted in the identification of 7 semifinalists.

In November, the committee telephoned references from the semifinalists. The board members spoke to superintendents and board members, the principals spoke to principals and other administrators, and teachers spoke to teachers. Four finalists were selected. On January 18, Cannie was interviewed by the board in Sherburne. In one session, she disagreed with Board President Lieto when he asked a question about "teaching to the test." The board members were pleased that she stated her position forcefully and clearly and presented a logical argument to justify her answer. She felt very comfortable during the interview and brought up the issue of face. Once she put it on the table, it was very openly discussed, and the board members admitted that they had wanted to discuss it but were not sure of how the subject should be introduced. On the 19th, Dr. Cannie met with a very cooperative Superintendent Martinelli and collected the test data and district information she requested. She left the district with a very positive impression. She felt she was treated fairly and all questions were answered openly. A few weeks later, Lieto contacted her to ask if a subcommittee of the board could visit Wyandanch in two days to talk with a cross-section of the school community.

Cannie smilingly recalls the hubbub the visit of the search committee caused in Wyandanch. A full day of meetings with every major constituency in the Wyandanch district was planned. The administrators showed off their schools with an attitude of accomplishment and pride. At the time of the visit, the Wyandanch superintendent was a black man. The community, a high percentage of the staff, and the students were also black. To have one of their own black administrators reach final consideration by a white male-driven community was indeed a special moment for Wyandanch. The Wyandanch staff felt they had launched a winner.

They also felt protective of her and wanted to make sure Sherburne-Earlville was good enough. While the Sherburne-Earlville board was not prepared to be interviewed, the interest with which the Wyandanch staff assessed the Sherburne board's motives helped measure the sincerity and truthfulness of their own comments about Cannie's qualities and faults.

On the other hand, once it became clear that Mary Cannie was very seriously being considered, some people in Sherburne-Earlville questioned whether the position should be offered to a black woman from New York City. They asked, "Why would she come to Sherburne?" The board members contended it was their responsibility to identify the best candidate based upon the interview process and to offer that person the superintendency. They further believed that it was not their responsibility to eliminate someone based on assumptions. If the finalist did not want to accept, he or she must be free to decline.

Earlville Elementary School Principal Donald DuBois served on the search committee. He came to the area in 1964 from Arizona to visit his grandparents on their farm in Pitcher, New York. He loved the area and decided to attend Cortland State College. He met his wife and never left. On their small farm he raised two boys, calves, chickens, pigs, and now Christmas trees. After nineteen years as Earlville Principal, DuBois still thinks Sherburne-Earlville is a good place to live and work. He recalled his impressions of Cannie: "Mary knew about reading, writing, developmental education, and kids. When she didn't know about something she would simply say 'I don't know' rather than cover up with fudging."

The Transition

Impressed with her credentials, her ideas, and her ability to speak forcefully and truthfully about her beliefs, the board offered Cannie the superintendency in February to take effect on July 1. This gave her time to become involved in district activities. The board's process was intentionally designed to

allow the new superintendent to participate in the selection of new building level administrators to replace retirees. They planned for her to be involved in selecting her team, and Cannie was very committed to making this work. On weekends and when Wyandanch was on break, she drove 250 miles up and 250 miles down to accept board invitations to churches, homes, the Chenango County School Boards' Annual Dinner, and the Sherburne-Earlville Board Retirement Dinner. It was a period of relationship building. She developed a good sense of what the board wanted and she got to know the principals.

During spring break, Cannie worked from a table Martinelli set up in his office. With his support, she hired the current middle school principal. When the Director of Special Education retired and the board planned to eliminate that position, she lobbied for and won an expansion of that responsibility into a new Director of Pupil Personnel Services which she hired. By the time she began her contract, people had forgotten she was new. By the end of her first year, the new superintendent had hired a third administrator, the principal of the high school.

How It Is Working

The Board

At the end of her first contractual term, Cannie had concerns about her growing involvement in buildings and grounds and facilities issues. In her view, the relationship had been successful because the board was very clear about what it wanted from the superintendent -- an education leader to focus on curriculum. She wondered if perhaps the district now required expertise she did not have. Current Board President Peter Darby's response to her concern was "What can we do to make sure that you are not being pulled away from the instructional area?" The ability to express such a concern and the response Cannie received represents the level of respect and openness that exists between the board and its superintendent.

Cannie's contract was extended for a second three-year term by a school board with four new members: Margaret Corey, a real estate businessperson; Robert Yerton, a utility company worker; Richard Lagoe, a former Sherburne-Earlville superintendent; and Angela Jones a secretary in a local business. The board remains content with the direction and leadership Cannie is providing for Sherburne-Earlville.

The Community

Cannie appeared as a panelist on a public station television show in January 1993. The discussion involved parental involvement in the schools and the new State Commissioner's Regulation 100.11 related to A New Compact For Learning. The mandate requires school districts to plan for parental involvement in school decision-making policies and activities by February 1, 1994. The host of the show referred to "the living laboratory of Sherburne-Earlville" because parents and commu-

nity people have been involved in the strategic planning process and other decision making for several years. Under the leadership of Cannie and the school board, what Cannie calls "a sense of trust" has developed with the community. For two years they ran weekly articles in the local newspaper explaining school issues and how the school system operated. The articles provided a one-way communication with the community and were generally well received. Some people complained, however, that they were not written so ordinary people could understand them. That sent a clear message that Cannie constantly reminds her staff about all written materials -- "use more simple language, make it easier to understand."

By encouraging the community to attend meetings and comment on activities being discussed, a comfortable solution to the hot issue of sex education was reached, with religious leaders presenting their views to students as part of the curriculum. Michael Sandore, the new high school principal, was anxious to come to Sherburne-Earlville. "It has the best reputation in the area," he says, "I heard that good things were going on here." And they are.

These days, people feel very involved with the school system and it represents the town's most visible success. Cannie is often stopped in the supermarket or in a restaurant to discuss school concerns. Her participation on the Economic Development Council, the Chamber of Commerce, the Chenango County United Way, and the Broome County Urban League gives her an ear and a voice in the business community. From her associations on these committees she gets a better understanding of the community at large and its concerns, and often gets an opportunity to tell business people what the schools need, like release time for parents to participate in school activities.

The Superintendent

Life has radically changed for Mary Cannie. She has learned

that she is a superintendent at night, on weekends, and holidays. She lives in a house on an open hill with her sister Hester, a nursing student, and Hester's three children who add to the single-digit black student population. Winter is very cold in Sherburne, and the season snow falls are measured in feet. In a community whose lifestyle is geared to family life, a single woman can feel rather isolated. Women's clubs want to know what it's like to be a woman with such an important position. Female students tell her "We think its cool that you're the superintendent."

Cannie maintains relationships with former colleagues and the community. She was invited by the Wyandanch district to present a workshop for teachers in breaking into school administration. In 1992, she was the keynote speaker at the Wyandanch Annual Scholarship Banquet.

She brings to this upstate county dynamic professionalism that is drawing attention. She is a role model for the girls and women in Sherburne and neighboring towns and cities. And, she expands the cultural awareness of a great many white people. The Board of Education and the superintendent agree that it is critical for the Sherburne-Earlville students to see a minority person in a position of leadership. Where the students in Wyandanch have the opportunity to see many black people in leadership roles, the students in Sherburne-Earlville may never have had such an opportunity if Dr. Cannie had not accepted the superintendency.

Cannie is quick to point out that racism does exist in Sherburne. Just like the rest of the country, opinions of what black people do professionally are often developed and influenced by what people see on television. She does not expect 100 percent acceptance in Sherburne or anyplace else -- people don't like or accept others for a variety of reasons. However, she notes that race and gender are not the issues with which she deals in doing her job. When there are complaints, they are about the common issues faced by any school district superintendent. She has been

successful because she does her job well, and she has a good working relationship with the board that is open, supportive, and focused on children.

For however long this chemistry works in Sherburne, Mary Cannie is empowering staff and training people to continue with or without her. Her secretary, Gina Muhfeld, says "I always knew I could do more than type. Dr. Cannie has given me new responsibilities that I've learned to do well."

What Was Important

The Sherburne-Earlville Central School District is better now because the school board had the vision and took the time to set up a process that focused on what was important. Once what was important was clearly understood, other issues were not discussed. The board was clear on the kind of leader it wanted and they were open to all eligible candidates, not just those that might be presented to them by agencies. Led by an assertive board, the Sherburne community welcomed the new superintendent with a social and professional transition that did not disturb the positive feelings about the school system. The board planned for the new superintendent to be able to shape her staff before her contract actually began and the outgoing superintendent invited her participation in district business. Consequently, there was no long period of adjustment and the community was quite comfortable with their new leader by the time she took over.

The board and the superintendent involved parents and community people in district issues. They kept district business open, invited community participation and responded to community concerns. There was broad staff participation in the district-evaluation and the search process that insured support for the new leader. The board supported the superintendent during her development of an external educational audit, the strategic planning process, and exit outcomes. Because this support came early in her contract the district was able to move forward in the correct directions.

The district is better now because Dr. Mary Cannie was a well trained, experienced educator who was dedicated to the welfare of children. She capitalized on the standards and expertise that were in place and continued to seek opportunities to make the schools better. The board, the superintendent, and the staff

have developed a sense of trust between themselves and with the community.

The school board hired Dr. Cannie because she was well qualified and her attitude was sincere and energetic. She chose the district because it was sound and supportive and poised for new ideas. They kept her because she is a very good superintendent. She stayed because the community gave her opportunities to expand her professional expertise and she takes her other community roles seriously. She says to women and minorities, "Don't eliminate yourself from any competition -- there are places where gender and race are not the issues. If you are well prepared, be willing to take the risks."

Finally, the Sherburne-Earlville Central School District is better now because a healthy school community was in a place that was eager to grow, because the Board of Education operated from a base of clear priorities without regard for irrelevant issues, and because Dr. Mary Cannie was willing to make an extraordinary contribution to her new environment.

Photo by Barbara A. Dodds

The Sherburne-Earlville Mission Statements

1989-90

Sherburne-Earlville Central School is committed to children. By providing a challenging climate which nurtures self-respect, promotes excellence in achievement and fosters life-long learning, individuals will become positive, contributing members of society.

1991

Sherburne-Earlville is committed to students. By providing an environment of educational excellence which emphasizes the learning of academic and life skills, nurtures self-respect, fosters life-long learning, we enable our students to pursue challenging individual goals and to become positive, contributing members of society.

The Vision Statement, 1992

Preparing students to function in the 21st century is not an easy task. Defining the issues and knowledge base which will exist is not clearly understood and in many instances undiscovered. The complexities and uncertainties with which an individual must cope mandates that one is:

Aware of the cultural, ethnic, and racial diversities that will become more obvious as the world gets "smaller."

Capable of retrieving information about world affairs in an effective and efficient manner.

Cognizant of the skills needed to pursue professional career opportunities and is able to demonstrate mastery of said skills in a competitive market.

Capable of communicating in the written and oral modes.

Able to demonstrate decision-making skills which indicate application of higher level thought and reasoning.

Strong in his/her sense of self and is secure enough to take risks while testing new and unproven concepts and ideas.

Photo by Barbara A. Dodds

Donald DuBois
Principal,
Earlville Elementary School

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